



*Hal Robberts of the State Police played a long hunch on . . . .*

## The Masked Alibi

*By John Gregory*

SOMEWHERE in the gathering gloom of the Adirondack forest a twig snapped sharply. Corporal Hal Robberts, New York state trooper, halted, his whipcord body of his tensing beneath the trim gray and black uniform. For a moment he listened, his gloved hand sliding back to the comforting assurance of the big .45 Colt belted around the sheepskin coat.

Then he pushed slowly forward. A snow-covered branch caught the toe of his snowshoe, tripping him. Simultaneously came the whiplike crack of a rifle. Something tugged sharply at the trooper's fur cap, whined off the darkness.

Before the echoes of the shot died, Robberts was wriggling his way to the shelter of a nearby spruce.

"Some crazy poacher," he muttered. There was no one else it could be, for on this particular assignment the lean-faced trooper carried no warrant in his pocket. But knowing the peculiar breed of men in the mountains Robberts slid the .45 into his hand and waited.

Only a fool would charge that hidden rifle with only a revolver. And Robberts was no fool. There were plenty of men in this remote section of the Adirondacks—men who had lived alone until their minds had slightly cracked—who would shoot down an officer if they feared arrest for some petty poaching offense.

Stealthily, foot by foot, the trooper wormed his way from the shelter of the pine. Taking advantage of every available bit of cover, ears

keenly alert, eyes striving to pierce the gathering gloom, Robberts began a tortuous circle that should bring him to the rear of the spot which he had marked as the origin of the ambusher's shot. Suddenly, he stood erect with a muttered exclamation of disgust.

A trampled spot in the snow behind the bole of a huge spruce marked the ambusher's waiting place. Robberts picked a spent cartridge from the ground. But that meant nothing, for the cartridge was a .32-40, which would fit a third of the woodsmen's rifles. For a moment he stared at the webbed tracks of snowshoes that led off into the gloom, debating. Then he shrugged; no use to swing out on the trail tonight for in ten minutes pitch darkness would envelop the mountains. But he could camp nearby, and in the morning trail down the maker of those crisscrossed tracks.

For fifteen minutes the trooper slogged on through the snow and increasing cold. Suddenly he halted, staring at a steady gleam of light that flickered from the darkness a few hundred yards ahead of him.

Ten minutes later Robberts was standing before a rude cabin from which light streamed through dingy window panes. He paused for a moment, striking a match and examining a pair of snowshoes hanging from a peg in the outside wall. But these were not the webs worn by that would-be killer back in the timber. Robberts knocked, then pushed open the door.

**A**BULKY man, face covered with a heavy growth of beard, arose and peered at the trooper through thick-lensed spectacles.

"Howdy, officer," the man said pleasantly, glancing at Robberts' black-striped breeches protruding from beneath the sheepskin coat. "Cold, ain't it?"

"Plenty," agreed Robberts, throwing cap and coat upon the bunk. "I'm looking for a place to hole up for the night."

"You've hit it," the bearded man returned cordially. "My name's Fred Dorgan. Been trapping some here, tryin' to make out the winter."

"Any luck?" asked Robberts idly.

Dorgan pointed with pride to several rows of furs hanging across the walls of the cabin. "Not bad. Average catch, I'd say. Take it easy while I rustle up a little grub. What takes you out this

weather, if it isn't an official secret?"

"No secret," the trooper said easily, "in fact, you may be able to help me. I'm Corporal Robberts, state trooper, from the Malone barracks. A bunch of us have been busy the past week searching for that big transport plane that crashed somewhere in the mountains. I happened to be assigned this territory. Haven't heard or seen anything of a crash around here, have you?"

Dorgan shook his head as he sliced bacon into a frying pan. "Nope, but that don't mean that the plane couldn't have cracked up not far away. Here in the cabin, with the wind howling outside, sounds don't carry from very far. Any passengers in the plane?"

Robberts shook his head. "No, just the pilot and co-pilot. The ship was carrying a bank shipment of currency though, and there's been a great row raised about it." He fished a paper from his pocket and opened it. "Pilot Walter Amsden, thirty-two, slender, brown hair. Copilot Frank Monroe, twenty-six, tall, redheaded. That's their description."

"Tell you what," Dorgan volunteered, "I'll make the rounds of my line early in the morning, then go out with you. We might stumble on something." A short time later Robberts pushed back from the crude table and reached for his pipe.

"Some one took a pop-at me with a rifle, back in the timber tonight," he said casually.

The trooper fished the cartridge from his pocket, and rising, crossed to where a Winchester hung on the wall. But the weapon was a .30-30, and the empty shell in his hand was a .32-40.

"Who's got a grudge against the troopers up here?" Robberts snapped abruptly.

Dorgan hesitated. "No one I know of, unless—"

"Unless what?" barked the trooper.

"I don't want to get any innocent party in trouble," Dorgan said uneasily, "but there's a queer old nut a few miles north of here that's apt to do most anything. Took a crack at me one day."

"What's his name?"

"Amos Norton," Dorgan answered, "he's got a .32-40 rifle, too."

"I've heard of him," Robberts said grimly. "One of the patrols brought him in to the precinct one day for poaching. He swore then he'd kill the next trooper he met in the woods."

"Well, if we're going to hunt for that crash in the morning, we'd better turn in," said Dorgan.

It was not yet dawn when Dorgan returned from his inspection of his trap line, and a short time later both men were slogging through deep snow into the timber.

"I've got only a few traps left out," Dorgan explained his short absence before dawn. "Been thinkin' of tryin' a different part of the country. Old Man Norton ain't what I call a desirable neighbor."

A short distance from Dorgan's cabin Robberts called a halt. "We'll separate here, and cover as much ground as possible. If either of us finds anything he can fire two quick shots to call the other. You tell me where Norton's shack is, and we'll meet near there, and pay the old boy a visit."

**A**FTER Dorgan had given detailed directions for finding Norton's cabin, the two separated. For an hour Robberts followed the course of a small winding river. Suddenly a small black object near the foot of a spruce caught his attention. Curiously the trooper strode to the spot and looked down at a fine pine marten, securely imprisoned in a steel trap. The little animal was frozen stiff by the intense cold. Robberts examined the trap staring for a long moment at the initials scratched in the steel. When he straightened a long whistle of satisfaction escaped his lips. Mind busy with a dozen thoughts he resumed his search.

The forenoon was half gone when Corporal Robberts broke through a protecting fringe of brush and gazed out over the frozen expanse of a tiny lake. And in the center of the lake lay a heap of blackened wreckage.

Hal drew his Colt and fired twice into the air before hurrying toward his find. When Dorgan came trotting across the little lake a short time later Robberts was still examining the remains of what had once been a big tri-motored Douglas.

"What a way to die!" Dorgan whispered in horror.

He was pointing at the snow-covered figure of a man sprawled a few yards from the wreck. Nodding in sombre agreement, Robberts turned the body over, gazed down into the features of a young man wearing the leather coat and goggles of a flyer.

"That's Co-pilot Monroe, all right," Robberts muttered. "Must have been thrown clear and struck his head on the ice. See, there's a bad wound there"

"And the pilot himself?" asked Dorgan.

Robberts pointed to the ghastly little heap of bones, charred leather, and cloth that he had salvaged from the debris.

"Let's hope the crash killed him," Dorgan mumbled nervously. "Let's get away from here, corporal. This mess gives me the creeps!"

"You've forgotten something," Robberts retorted. "There's supposed to be a box of currency around here somewhere!"

At the end of fifteen minutes' futile search Corporal Robberts gazed at Dorgan with a queer light in his steel-gray eyes.

"Maybe it burned with the plane," Dorgan ventured.

"Impossible," snapped the trooper. "The box was fire-proof. Dorgan, there's dirty work here. Some one's salvaged \$75,000 from this crash and made off with it!"

Dorgan said nothing, but his lips slowly framed a name. Robberts nodded, strapped the snowshoes again on his feet.

"We're making a little call right now on your friend, Amos Norton!"

Sun danced blindingly on dazzling white snow as the trooper and Dorgan cautiously approached Norton's ramshackle cabin. A tenuous thread of smoke eddying from the crazy chimney was the only sign of life about the place.

Hand on holstered Colt ready for instant action, Robberts boldly approached the cabin. A hard shove of his shoulder sent the rickety door flying wide open. Gun in hand, the state trooper lunged through the doorway, Dorgan at his heels. One brief look showed that the single-room cabin was empty. But a can of water simmered on the stove, and supplies and equipment were scattered carelessly everywhere.

"Looks as if he's coming back, anyway," remarked Robberts. "Watch for him, Dorgan, while I take a look for that money."

**A** THOROUGH search of the cabin revealed no trace of the missing currency. Robberts stepped outside and glanced keenly around the cabin walls. A sizable pile of firewood was

stacked neatly against one end of the shack. The next moment the trooper began a systematic dismantling of the piled wood.

Suddenly he straightened, a gleam of triumph in his eyes. In his hand was a shiny metal box. The missing money container! Eagerly he opened it, peered inside. Crisp green bank notes, neatly packed in a small bundle, partially filled the box. Carefully Robberts counted them, whistling softly in satisfaction. Though only a small portion of the lost cash was in the box the tall man in uniform seemed hugely content as he hurried back into the cabin.

"Found part of it," he jerked at the watching Dorgan. "Enough to convict the old fox, anyway. He'd hid it in the woodpile."

"Good!" Dorgan smiled, then—"Look out! Norton's coming!"

Robberts ducked down, then cautiously peered through the dirty window. A lanky old man was shuffling through the snow toward the cabin, rifle swinging from one hand. Dangling over one shoulder were the furry carcasses of a fox and several mink. As the trapper came closer Robberts stared with interest at the crafty, lined face and small, glittering eyes.

Amos Norton suddenly stopped, his eyes falling to the trampled tracks in the snow. At the same moment Robberts leaped through the doorway, his Colt swung up.

"Put 'em up, Norton!"

With an animal-like snarl Norton swung the rifle to his hip and fired.

The crashing report of the police .45 boomed upon the cold air as Norton's bullet whistled inches away from the trooper's head. As the rifle, smashed by the impact of the big revolver bullet, dropped from his hand, Norton leaped forward with a shrill cry, a long-bladed hunting knife springing like magic into his hand. Robberts was plunging at him, grimly shoving his gun back into the holster.

A shot cracked from the cabin door, missing Norton's head narrowly.

"Stop it, you fool!" the trooper yelled over his shoulder. "I'll handle this!"

Then the trapper closed in, eyes gleaming with maniacal rage. He slashed once, downward, as the trooper ducked. The blade sliced the sleeve of the sheepskin coat from shoulder to elbow, then

Robberts had the knife wrist in a grasp of iron.

For a moment the two men were locked in a motionless embrace of straining muscles. Norton's strength was enormous for a man of his age, and for a moment Robberts was hard put to hold his own. Then with a lightning twist Robberts slid his free hand behind Norton's neck, clamping it with his left upon the upraised knife hand. Exerting every ounce of muscle he possessed the trooper jerked. Norton fell heavily; the officer's body dropped on top. A moment of furious scuffling in the snow and Robberts arose, dragging the manacled trapper with him.

"Bad business, Norton, shooting at an officer, and robbing wrecked airplanes!"

"You dirty, interferin' state cop!" Norton mouthed, spitting snow and invective from his snarling mouth. "I'm sorry I missed ye last night!"

"So you admit shooting at me, and robbing the mail plane?" Robberts snapped.

"What? What's that about robbin' a mail plane?" Well-feigned astonishment spread over the trapper's dirty face. "Sure I shot at ye, and I'm sorry I missed! But I don't know what you're talking about when ye speak of a plane. I ain't seen no plane!"

Robberts held the packet of money before Norton. "Ever see that before?"

THE look of bewilderment vanished from Norton's crafty features, to be replaced by fear. Abruptly he shut his traplike mouth and refused to speak again.

"No use in staying here any longer," Robberts grunted to Dorgan. "Bring his gun and come on; we'll stay tonight at your cabin and I'll take him in in the morning."

At Dorgan's cabin Robberts secured his captive firmly to the bunk, then turned to watch Dorgan as the big man built a fire in the rusty stove and started preparations for supper. When the simple meal was over, Robberts leaned his chair against the door and smoked for a moment lazily.

"Hope you don't have any trouble taking Norton in tomorrow," Dorgan, said finally. "You just let me know when you want me to testify, and I'll be on hand."

"No," the trooper drawled, "I don't expect any trouble. Of course, handling a pair of prisoners

isn't a kid's job, but I guess I can swing it."

"A pair of prisoners!" Dorgan wheeled in surprise. "Why, where's your other one?" Robberts rose slowly to his feet, his right hand hooked carelessly in the wide cartridge belt.

"Slow down, mister," he shot back, all the softness gone from his voice. "I arrest you, Walter Amsden, for the murder of Fred Dorgan and Frank Monroe!"

For a pregnant moment the silence of death hung over the stuffy little room. Dorgan wheeled slowly from the stove, his face for a moment a malignant mask. Then his features relaxed.

"What're you talking about, trooper? You're telling me that I'm Amsden, the pilot of that Douglas? You're crazy! Your own description of Amsden says he was a slender man with brown hair. Well, take a look at me!"

"I'm looking at you," Robberts said quietly. "You were pretty clever, Amsden, but you slipped up on two or three little things. I first became suspicious when I looked around while you were supposed to be making the rounds of your trap lines and found that there wasn't a sign of extra clothing about the place. A slender man, who'd dyed his hair, might put on a lot of additional clothes to make himself look bigger. So I kept my eyes open. This morning I found a marten in a trap marked with Dorgan's initials. That meant you didn't know the location of Dorgan's traps!"

"A fine lot of rot."

"Oh, that isn't all," Robberts said placidly, "you interrupted me. You planned this 'crash,' Amsden, for some time, marking the location of both Dorgan's and Norton's cabins. You even had the dye to change the color of your hair with you. You simply landed on that lake, probably already having killed the co-pilot in his seat. You came to Dorgan, got all the information about him and Norton you could. Then you killed him, changed clothes with him, and after placing him in the plane and leaving Monroe clear for future identification, you burned the ship.

"But just to make sure, you planted a small part of the money at Norton's cabin. When he took a shot at me last night, he was playing right into your hands."

Dorgan, or Amsden; shifted his feet nervously.

"But here's what's going to send you to the chair, Amsden!" Robberts cried suddenly, pointing to the shiny money box. "Your big mistake was in leaving the money you planted on Norton still in the box. For the paint on that box wasn't even scorched, showing it was taken from the plane, *before* the burning, not *after*!"

AS the words fell upon the silence like a bombshell, the room erupted into violent action. With a lightning swing of his arm Amsden seized the pan of scalding dish water from the stove and flung it straight at Robberts' face. As the trooper attempted to duck his foot slipped and he went half to his knees. Half of the contents of the pan splashed agonizingly into his face, blinding him. Instinctively his finger contacted upon the trigger of the Colt.

The bullet smashed through the flimsy stove, scattering a shower of flaming coals upon the floor. Simultaneously the roaring form of Amsden crashed into the trooper, rocking him with flailing, vicious blows.

He groped, once, for the gun dangling from its lanyard. Instantly Amsden's fist closed on his wrist, while the pilot's other muscular hand gripped the trooper's throat.

With a mighty effort Robberts brought his right knee up to Amsden's stomach, shoved with all his strength. The murderer staggered, mouthing maniacal curses, suddenly whirled and lunged toward the rifle standing in a corner. Frantically Robberts fumbled for his .45. Amsden's rifle came up, leveled, just as the trooper's hand closed over the butt of the Colt.

Red murder stared from Amsden's glaring eyes as Robberts squeezed the trigger. Two thundering reports filled the cabin, pounded on Robberts' ears through a fog of pain and powder smoke.

Amsden slumped, completely cowed, in a corner, nursing a shattered shoulder. On the bunk old Amos Norton regarded the trooper with admiring eyes:

"By cracky, you state cops kin fight, at that," he said excitedly. "I ain't goin' to crack down on a state policeman agin! I had you figured for a bunch of nosey snoopers, but anybody that kin figure out a mess like this is okay!"